

academic publishing in crisis?

There is much talk of a crisis in the traditional publishing world¹. Being “in flux” describes it more accurately. Both may strike the heart with fear, for where no single homogenous picture exists, heterogeneity prevails. But crisis is not necessarily irremediable, nor flux a bad thing. Heterogeneity may just mean more choice, crisis the opportunity to make radical decisions. In a different context, **Thompson and Warburton** answered negative perceptions of crisis and flux with the simple idea that where the problem is multiple, so too is the solution. And if plurality is part of the problem it will also be part of the solution.² What I am suggesting in other words is that the decision to take a positive view of complexity can help us reflect differently, and positively, about the rapid shifts and changes that are taking place in publishing.

But what exactly do we mean by the crisis in publishing? There is, in fact, no one view. Perceptions differ according to the status and point-of-view of whoever is speaking. Let’s look at the views of the main protagonists.

Academic Authors

It is clear that publication is a serious and stressful issue for scholars. Contradictory messages and rumours abound about how and where to publish. It has been suggested that the pressure to publish or professionally ‘be damned’ combines with a fear of being published and damned. The resulting paranoia mixes with anxiety about receiving poor returns for valiant efforts or, if the work is commercially successful, of being ‘stitched up’ by badly formed contracts and licensing deals. Blaise Cronin sets out the academic’s dilemma. The search for ‘greater all-round professional salience’ is aligned to a desire to be read (and the need to be cited). The most common view is to publish at any cost. But what does any cost mean? Quite simply, it means that you publish as many articles as possible, that you write a monograph – even better, two – and, finally, that you opt for co-authorship in one of the top-ten journals in your field. For most academics, this multiple approach is time-consuming, stressful and results-driven.

However, the messages coming out of academia are confused. The Times Higher recently reported that the RAE is moving away from its demand to publish ‘career-grade’ papers. And the director of HEFCE has asserted that, “It is not all about publishing in high-impact journals. It is about ensuring that high-quality research is disseminated by any means”³. This seems to couch a new threat. Does ‘by any means’ imply an added pressure of online visibility? (Cronin suggests that you ‘think digital’.)

These mixed messages show why academic authors feel themselves to be ‘in crisis’. In a world where the rules change all the time; it is not easy to decide how best to proceed, or how to evaluate effort versus reward.

Academic Editors

For editors, new publishing genres, such as digital formats, electronic open access, and self-publishing, threaten editorial control and creative satisfaction, whilst retailer demands for heavy discounting is likely to force reductions in product quality. All may well affect profitability.

Marketing policies increasingly emphasise the need for instant best-sellers. Set this against the development of a long-term relationship with an author, in which the editor nurtures an author’s talent

over an extended number of titles and years, and you find an editor in crisis. The necessity to find a best-seller inculcates terror in the hearts of editors who complain that, if they don't get things right first-time round, they risk a speedy despatch to the professional dust heap. Along with the authors who have failed them⁴.

Academic Readers

In a market-driven world competition and multiple choice should at least benefit the reader. For readers, however, choice brings its own dangers: the very real risk of subsumption by difficult to locate and even harder to assess works in what may be, in this state of relativism, inadequately monitored and reviewed books. Overwhelming choice is hard to taxonomise. Because it overwhelms. The reader risks missing the new idea or the critical aspects of a debate altogether.

Just as bad, the rapid shifts in topic coverage, which the academic author feels obliged to subscribe to because that shift is often funding-led, may lead readers to lose sight of books that follow later in a challenging and ongoing debate. That is, if the refined and honed argument ever reaches the stage of publication. Information overload can make readers give up reading altogether. To retire to a darkened room, or worse, or to seek out poorly scrutinised summaries on the World Wide Web.

From Disaffection and Alienation to Opportunity and Creative Alternatives

From each perspective of crisis, authors, publishers and readers who should be natural allies may well end up being disaffected from one another. Each feels himself to be caught up in a publishing world order that is not so much at war but in crisis, and if not in crisis then, at least, in flux.

It is true that it is difficult to assess a state of flux; it complicates in often unreadable ways. But flux also opens up opportunities. Because flux is about change. It is also true that whilst crisis points to dis-ease it also signals a turning point in which creativity and choice play their part. This is why crisis is not irremediable and why flux is not a bad thing.

What crisis and flux mean though is that academic authors have to think out new publishing strategies. They need to be creative and innovative in terms of the how, what and where of publishing. But the very thing which they seem professionally to fear most is likely to be the one which offers the most exciting prospects for career enhancement.

Crisis and flux also mean that publishers can no longer afford to sit comfortably astride an industry in which, for the most part, they have traditionally dictated the terms. They need to re-evaluate the role and purpose of the editor and set them against the needs of the authors and readers. They need to look at whether they can take on some of the functions of the agent.

Generally speaking readers know what they want to read. For them, crisis and flux mean keeping abreast the new technologies. And this means developing new skills in how and from where to select their reading. The challenge is in making the proliferation in choice work for them. This probably means in terms of sourcing and purchasing.

A Positive View of Plurality

I wish to highlight the benefit that will come from changing perceptions about chaos and flux. In the complex world of academic publishing the problems are multiple but this means that the solutions will be too. Creative, flexible approaches are likely to enhance publishing not take away from it. Some of the following solutions are exciting as well as potentially rewarding:

An obvious solution is for academic institutions to side-line publishers altogether and to take the business of publishing into their own hands. Cronin calls this "the lunatics-run-the-asylum approach to scholarly publishing"⁵ The advantages are clear: control over material, speed of publication, the potential for funding partnerships.

Another is for authors to pay for their work to be published in an Open Access form. If the institutions to which they belong foot the bill, the author will not suffer financially and the institution gains credit. It also speeds up the publishing process. After all, it is in their interest to promote their research. The author could receive a one-off fee in this system. Additionally, Open Access comes close to what Cronin calls the “cherished ideal of a scholarly creative commons”. Readers pay for a page-by-page access to work. However, the downside of Open Access may be the demise of the book, although it may offer an alternative, complementary source for readers.

Other possibilities exist. One will involve a new streamlined type of publisher. This may provide answers to the needs of academic institutions as well as their authors. Triarchy Press is taking this latter option seriously.

Rosie Beckham, September 2005

Endnotes

¹ See Blaise Cronin’s article, *Adapt or die: The complex and rapidly changing world of academic authorship*, *The Author*, Summer 2005, pp57-58)

² Michael Thompson, Michael Warburton. *Decision Making Under Contradictory Certainties: How to Save the Himalayas When You Can’t Find Out What’s Wrong With Them*. *Journal of Applied Systems Analysis*, Volume 12, April, 1985, pp3-34.

³ *Leader*, RAE shifts focus from prestige journal. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, July 22, 2005. Citing Rama Thirunamachandran, the director of research at the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

⁴ See Simon Trewin’s article, *Kill editors, kill publishing*, *The Author*, Autumn, 2004, pp 105 -106

⁵ Cronin, 58.